

General George Washington's Last Trip Across The Allegheny Tableland, 1784

By C. W. Beerbower

(Author's note): Just south of the old Fort Cumberland Road in Preston County, West Virginia—the same road becoming a part of the "Sandy Creek Road," the second oldest road laid out through Fayette County, Pennsylvania—the writer of this article was born in a log cabin. Since his father died when he was seven, he left his home and lived in the home of Mrs. Barbara Robinson, the widow of a Methodist minister. Here he had access to a well-filled library and for almost ten years he was an ardent student of biography, philosophy, religion, and particularly history and travel. At the age of twenty he drove a horse hitched to a two-wheeled cart from Terra Alta, West Virginia to Aurora, and then over the old Northwestern Toll Turnpike to Winchester, Virginia. This trip of 110 miles took three days, and the experiences on this historic road became the beginning of a career of gathering history, folklore, Indian artifacts, and the study of Indian Trails in Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Now, at the age of 82, the writer is recording some of the material that he has collected. His files of clippings from books, journals, newspapers, letters, etc., number over 50 volumes of over 52,000 pages. The following relates part of the contents of one of these favorite volumes labeled—George Washington.

As a lad, in the 1880's, my uncle often told me of the visit of the famous man, George Washington, in the Glade Country of West Virginia. The General had stayed in the Spurgeon home. This tale was authenticated many years later. It was not until 1896 that interest in Washington was again revived, for I was stopping in Fairfax, Virginia, where I visited the Court House. Here I met Mr. F. W. Richardson, clerk of Fairfax County Court, a very pleasant gentleman of southern ancestry, whose father had been in the same office for almost a half century. Mr. Richardson asked me of my stay in Fairfax, and then he

¹ *Scoutings, Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars, 1763-1783.*

asked, "Young man, are you interested in seeing George Washington's will and the will of his wife, Martha?" He told me the originals were in the safe, but that he would show me the Will Book in which they were recorded. I asked, and was granted permission to make a copy of Washington's will as executed July 9, 1799. I spent half a day copying the schedule of property of which the amount of land owned by Washington was 56,475 acres and the total value placed at \$464,804.00. From this schedule, we note he had vast acreage in Western Pennsylvania and Virginia. During Washington's lifetime he visited his holdings and this is a story of his last trip.

The purpose of Washington's trip across the Allegheny Tablelands was to visit his western lands in Pennsylvania and to study a feasible route to extend his Chesapeake Canal from the headwaters of the Potomac River, to the headwaters of the Cheat, and by way of the Monongahela River to Fort Pitt, now Pittsburgh.

September 1, 1784, George Washington, his nephew, Bushrod Washington, and Dr. Craik and his son, William Craik, started from Mt. Vernon, Virginia on the long trip by horseback.

The General had not seen his vast acreage of wild land in Western Pennsylvania, since 1770, nor that on the Great Kanawha River, in what was then Virginia, but now West Virginia.

The object of this trip over the Tablelands of Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania was to view this land, and attempt to rent some of the tillable land at Canonsburg, and also see or rent his mill property at Perryopolis, in Fayette County, Pennsylvania.

Their journey took them by way of Leesburg, and Hillsboro, through the gap in the Blue Ridge Mountain to the home of his brother at Charlestown. They were entertained in the brother's home and Washington talked with General Daniel Morgan and other men who were present.

It is recorded that Washington said, and I quote:

And one object of my journey being to obtain information of the present and best communication between the Eastern and

Western waters, and to facilitate as much as in me lay the navigation of the Potomack. I conversed a good deal with General Morgan on the Subject.

The party continued their journey and traveled by Martinsburg to Bath, now the famous Berkeley Springs summer resort, where they lodged for the night with a Captain Strode of "Opequon Creek." The reader will note that the name of a creek, mill, or ferry appears on Colonial maps rather than names of villages. Captain Strode lived on the south side of the Potomac, where the Opequon Creek flowed into the north branch of the Potomac. In regard to the crossing of the Potomac, I quote from Miss Alice R. Jordan of Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, under date of February 19, 1954, as follows:

In regard to the place that George Washington crossed the Potomac River in going from Berkeley Springs to the State of Maryland and to the present U. S. 40, I am very sure that he went to the river and crossed at Hancock which put him exactly on the Cumberland Road. The reason I think this is because the Indian Trail known locally as the "Warm Spring Road," leads from the East, where it crossed the Susquehanna to the Warm Springs, at Berkeley, West Virginia. This point is six miles from Hancock, where the Potomac was, and is still crossed. The Warm Spring Road runs through Mercersburg.

The party was now on the Cumberland or Braddock's Road, heading for Will's Creek, or Fort Cumberland. After reaching the village, Washington left the party and rode to the home of Gilbert Simpson to make some arrangements for the sale of some property he and Simpson had in partnership. He then joined the other members of his party, and journeyed over the famous "Nemacolin Trail," which was opened in 1754 for Washington to take his Continental soldiers to the "Great Meadows" and to his defeat at Fort Necessity, July, 1754. They stopped overnight at the "Little Meadows," at the "Tomlinson's Tavern."¹

Joseph Tomlinson surveyed in 1760 and patented in 1761 "Good Will," 100 acres, the first land patented in Garrett County, Maryland. This tract included the historical "Little Meadows" on the Braddock Road; here Tomlinson built the "Red House Inn."

Washington and his party continued across Casselman River, passed the "Bear Camp" where Braddock's army took two days

¹ Thelma Funderburg Weeks, *Oakland Centennial History, 1849-1949*.

to make a road through the projecting rocks in 1755. They followed the present U. S. 40 crossing the Youghiogheny River at the "Great Crossing", which at the present time is under water, including three-span stone bridge erected by the government in 1818, when building the only road constructed entirely by the United States Government.

Washington continued his journey stopping overnight at a camp four miles east of Fort Necessity or "Great Meadows." The following day he journeyed by "Fort Necessity" and on to Beesontown laid out by the Beeson brothers who were Quakers. Uniontown, Fayette County, Pennsylvania, is located on the old Nemacolin Indian Trail from Gists to "Old Fort", now Brownsville, Pennsylvania.

We will now follow the party to land owned by General Washington and his partner, Gilbert Simpson, situated at Perryopolis, Fayette County, Pennsylvania. Washington visited the old gristmill, and examined the various tracts of land surrounding the mill. He met Colonel William Butler and the Commander of the garrison at Fort Pitt. I quote from the late C. M. Bomberger.³

In 1780 William Crawford Surveyor of Yo-ho-ga-nia County (claimed by Virginia) wrote in his survey book about a tract of land warranted to Benjamin Johnston, being on the "Yuhogany River," and to include a bank of iron ore.

In regard to the sale at Simpsons (Perryopolis), let us look at Washington's diary:

My mill I could obtain no bid for, although I offered an exemption from the payment of rent for fifteen months. The plantation on which Mr. Simpson lived rented well, viz. for 500 bushels of wheat payable at any place within the county that I, or my agent might direct the little chance of getting a good offer in money for rent, induced me to set it up to be bid for in wheat.

The partnership with Mr. Simpson was terminated and General Washington employed Thomas Freeman as his Western manager.

The party journeyed to the Monongahela River and were ferried across; lodging with Colonel John Canon of Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, which was founded in 1773. It is related by historians that the said John Canon was one of the parties who had

³ See Wilson's report to George Mason, *American Archives*, Vol. II, pp. 514-518.

made a trip to Williamsburg, Virginia, to see Dinwiddie to intercede in having him send messengers to warn the French not to build forts in Western Pennsylvania and Virginia. Washington noted that the people who were living on his land were mostly Scotch-Irish and were very religious and Presbyterians under the leadership of the great Rev. John McMillan. Washington decided not to visit his tenants on Sunday, but wait until Monday. He states his land as 2,813 acres, and fourteen tenants.

It is related that he was in the home of Squire David Reed; and Reed and James Scott wanted to buy some land. Washington said he would lease the land for 99 years. The deal was not consummated and Washington and his party retraced their journey to Beesontown (Uniontown), Pennsylvania. While Washington was in Beesontown, he employed Attorney Thomas Smith to proceed with ejectment suits against the tenants at Canonsburg, Pennsylvania.

In Beesontown, Washington had an interview with Captain Harding, concerning the portage between the headwaters of the Potomac and the Cheat River. We do not have any account of this conversation, but Washington decided to send Dr. Craik, and his son William back to Mt. Vernon, by way of Fort Cumberland with their baggage, while he and his nephew, Bushrod Washington, left Beesontown and rode to Point Marion, at the mouth of Cheat River where it empties into the Monongahela River. Legends and folklore stories tell us that Christopher Gist and Bernard Eckerline descended the Monongahela River in a small boat to Logstown on the Ohio River in 1737. Washington and his nephew proceeded to Pierponts (Easton, Monongahela County, West Virginia) where he spent the night and talked with Zackquill Morgan and others, discussing the water route over the Alleghenies from the headwaters of the Potomac to the headwaters of the Cheat.

In the morning Washington was told that the "Old path to Dunkards Bottom was grown up." In reference to this trail and early road from Braddock's Road at "Bear Camp," I quote from Mrs. Weeks: *Oakland Centennial History, 1849-1949*;⁴

⁴ Weeks, *Oakland Centennial History*, p. 14.

The Morgantown Road was referred to by Washington in 1784 as "the new road." It followed an Indian trail from Bear Camp on Braddock's Road, through Selby's Port to Morgantown.

Washington and his only companion, Bushrod Washington, crossed Cheat River at Ice's Ferry below the present Lake Lynn and traveled over a part of the old Morgantown Road and also over a part of the McCullough Path from Winchester, Virginia, to the Redstone Country in Fayette County, Pennsylvania. They passed by "Mortons" Mill on Big Sandy, a tributary of Cheat River, to the home of James Spurgeon in the "Sandy Creek Glades." We will briefly mention the Spurgeons—James and John—and a number of other pioneers who had crossed over the Allegheny Mountains from the east as early as 1767. Samuel Wiley, in his *History of Preston County, West Virginia* (Kingwood, 1882), states:

In September 1767, Mason and Dixon run their celebrated line along the Northern boundary of (what is) Preston, through an unbroken wilderness, and were ordered back by the Shawnees and Delawares but a few miles east of where Preston and Monongahela now corner upon the said line. In this same year Lawrence Harrison in right of George Washington, located 267 acres of land in (West) Augusta County (Va.) embracing the site of Fort Necessity, and Washington received a land Certificate for it from Virginia.

Wiley also states that John Judy was the first permanent settler on the soil of Preston County.

The most extensive early settlement that was made in the present Glade Farms district was that in the "Sandy Creek Glades." These lands were taken up by the Spurgeons, Richard Morris, Hoge (Hoguemeyer) from Hagerstown, Maryland; Worley, Van Sickel, Cushmans, and Robinettes. The James Spurgeon tract was 400 acres, and it was in his home that Meshach Browning spent several years when a boy. It will be noticed that the names of John Maurice and Richard Maurice from Trimble's survey of 1774 have been spelled Morris. Fort Morris was built on lands of Richard Morris. In this connection regarding Fort Morris, I shall refer to Mrs. Week's account of the settlement:

A company of "Rangers" was organized in 1775 by the settlers of the "Sandy Creek settlement" between the Youghiogheny and Cheat Rivers. Its headquarters were Fort Morris, which had

been built in 1774 at Glade Farms. The officers of the Rangers were: Captain Augustine Friend; Lieutenant Gabriel Friend; Sergeant Abijah Herrington. This company protected the settlement from the Indians until the close of war.

Washington and his nephew coming from "Mortons" Mill, Bruceton Mills, West Virginia, passed through the Quaker settlement where Brandonville was started, the oldest settlement perhaps in Preston County. The Judy's on the Henry Smith Farm were supposed to have been there in 1767. The reader can imagine how the Spurgeon family were surprised to have General Washington and his nephew, Bushrod Washington, ask for lodging for the night in September 1784. We have no record as to how many were in the family of James Spurgeon, but one of his sons, Jesse Spurgeon, died April 3, 1865, aged 81 years, which would make Jesse 4 years old when General Washington was an overnight guest in the home. We have no record of the trip the next day, only that they camped on the ground sleeping on their overcoats, at a point on the old DeBerry Farm where Hopemont Sanitarium is now located.

General Washington and his nephew called the next morning after breaking camp, at the home of Charles Friend, now Oakland, Garrett County, Maryland, and secured corn for their horses and "porridge," or it may have been cold mush, made from corn meal. The General and his nephew passed over a part of the McCullough Path, until it intersected with the Northwest Turnpike, now U. S. 50, until they reached Mt. Storm. Then they started home over the Allegheny Tablelands to his beloved Mount Vernon Mansion, on the Potomac. General George Washington became the first President of the United States, and took the oath of office in New York City, April 30, 1789. Bushrod Washington, his nephew, became one of the Chief Justices of the United States.